

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 8-AWASHINGTON TIMES
5 March 1986

Bulgarian truckers run French vehicles off the roads

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SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

PARIS — France has become a pit stop for Bulgarian truckers trafficking in drugs, arms, fake American cigarettes and bogus whiskey. The truckers are also suspected of spying on key French military installations.

The Bulgarian truckers have formed a stranglehold on truck traffic between France and the Middle East, according to an association recently formed to protect the interests of some 50 French trucking companies.

The companies are suing the ministries of finance and transport for doing nothing to resist the invasion. While the chief targets of their ire are the Bulgarians, other Soviet bloc states, such as Hungary and Poland, also have a piece of the action.

Henri Angelo, the president of the truckers association, said last week he had alerted the French transport ministry of the "Bulgarian invasion"

but had been given evasive replies by senior leftist politicians.

The dimensions of the problem could be judged by a few telling statistics. From 1975 to 1980, about 1,000 French trucks were plying between France and the Middle East; today the number has dropped to around 50. In contrast, the number of hauls made by Bulgarian trucks last year has been estimated as high as 10,000.

Mr. Angelo said French trucking firms are finding it difficult to compete with Bulgarian truck enterprises, which pay their drivers a quarter of the wages offered to French drivers (about \$430 compared to \$1,700). And because the Bulgarian concerns are state-supported, they can undercut the standard French charge for a Paris-Baghdad haul, \$7,140, by as much as \$2,000.

"The only thing that interests the Bulgarians is earning hard currency. Because they are subsidized by the state, they can operate at a

loss, whereas we can't," said Mr. Angelo.

Early in 1982, Mr. Angelo wrote to the French transport ministry, pointing out that a Franco-Bulgarian convention signed in Sofia in March 1969, had insisted on "equity" in transport hauls, but this principle

was being flouted by the Bulgarians. The Bulgarian share of the trade, originally limited to 500 truck hauls a year, had shot up over the 5,000 mark, while the French share had sunk way below the 500 mark.

The ministry first reacted by subjecting Carry International to fiscal control by internal revenue. Then, in

1983, social security inspectors conducted a search for "irregularities." The ministry was then headed by Charles Fiterman, a communist.

After the four communist ministers had resigned from the cabinet and another government had taken office in July 1984, Mr. Angelo wrote

to the new premier, Laurent Fabius, explaining the plight of French trucking firms. His letter, he says, never elicited a reply.

Thousands of Bulgarian trucks now enter France without proper authorization and not even a summary customs inspection. French truckers say. In addition to the 5,000

Bulgarian trucks that are officially authorized to enter France, anywhere from 3,000 to 5,000 now enter the country illegally.

Early in 1984 the Bulgarians stepped up the tempo of their trailer-truck offensive by starting a "Med-link" ferry service between the Black Sea port of Burgas and the Mediterranean port of Marseilles. Two Bulgarian car-ferries — the "Trarevetz" and the "Trapezitza" — now put in to Marseilles once a week with 70 to 80 Bulgarian trucks, which are driven through customs without the slightest control.

According to Gilles Mermoz, who writes on Soviet subversion for the conservative weekly Valeurs Actuelles, Soviet trucks are generally used by the KGB and the GRU (military intelligence) for espionage purposes. Many Soviet truck drivers are in reality Soviet army intelligence officers. Soviet drivers have been caught red-handed in Sweden, Austria and Holland electronically eavesdropping near military bases or undertaking topographic surveys.

But Bulgarian trucks, because they are less obvious, are occasionally used for spying, and on several occasions they have been spotted on the Albion plateau, northeast of Marseilles, where France's nuclear missile silos are located.

At the truckers' press conference, Thierry Wolton, who wrote the recent best-seller "The KGB in France," recalled his November 1983 article in the weekly Le Point. It said a combined police, gendarmerie and DST (counterespionage service) operation aimed at exposing Bulgarian truck activities in France had been called off at the last moment on direct orders from the prime minister's office.